CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Historical Background

English came to Malaysia (then Malaya) with the advent of the British. It arrived at our schools, in the nineteenth century, with the establishment of Christian missionary schools where the medium of instruction was English. These ‘English’ schools produced a crop of students who were very proficient in the language, the majority of whom went on to serve in the administration of the colonial government. Although open to all, very few made it to secondary school, and even fewer to the Higher School Certificate and on to university. For the rest of the country, it was the Malay, Chinese or Tamil vernacular schools, which only provided primary-level education (Asmah, 1992; Awang Had Salleh, 1994).

With independence, there was a move to formulate a national education policy in which the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, for years the lingua franca, would take over as the official language and become the medium of instruction in schools. By 1983, Bahasa Malaysia had replaced English as the medium of instruction from primary-level to university-level education (Asmah, 1992; Awang Had Salleh, 1994).

The role of the English language changed: to that of the designated first second language, to be taught in all schools as a subject, and tested at all public examinations.
However, a significant point of note is that it did not then (in the years after independence), nor does it now, require a passing grade.

English is important in Malaysia today. In our endeavour to become a major player in the world economy, the establishment of the Multimedia Super Corridor, and other efforts towards globalization, English has taken on a new role in the country.

The Prime Minister, Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed, has expressed a realization of this new purpose, when in his paper on *Vision 2020*, he outlines the role of English in meeting the nation’s goals:

'... the challenge of establishing a scientific and progressive society, a society that is innovative and forward looking, one that is not only a consumer of technology but also a contributor to the scientific and technological civilization of the future’


The medium in which we will meet the challenges of *Vision 2020* will be the medium of English. It is the major international language of printed information in the fields of science, commerce, economics and technology. Both writers and readers of English acknowledge that English is important for the dissemination and acquisition of new information. It is the only way to access the wealth of information available in the written media – in books, on the computer, via the internet. Pragmatically, it is easier for us to become proficient in English than for us to depend on translation which, to date, has not been able to provide us with ‘cutting edge’ information (Asmah, 1992). However, the scenario for the English language in Malaysia is far from satisfactory. After eleven years of education in English as a Second Language (ESL), it would be reasonable to assume that students who reach tertiary level would have a basic
knowledge and competence in English. This is not the case. This is probably due to the fact that English is not a criteria for the passing of any of the major examinations in the country – this perhaps being one reason for this language not being seriously studied as a subject. As a language teacher of some twenty years’ experience, this researcher has noted that there is no homogeneity in student populations, with abilities ranging from near native-speaker to barely intelligible in English. As such, many students have problems coping with tasks that require reading or writing in English at tertiary level.

And, there is a need for students to be able to read, and in some cases to write, in English at tertiary level. Even in local universities, where the medium of instruction is mainly Bahasa Malaysia, students are required to access information from sources other than their recommended textbooks. Most of the information sourced from books would be in English. As such, students would need to be familiar with the means of accessing the knowledge in these texts via efficient reading. In privately-owned colleges, the medium of instruction is English. Here it is essential that students be able to read and write both efficiently and effectively in English. Their proficiency in reading will determine how well they are able to access knowledge found in various sources of information, and their ability to write well will determine how successfully they are able to communicate this knowledge they have gleaned to their instructors and examiners.
1.2 University Tenaga National (Uniten)

In line with the government’s call to make Malaysia a regional centre of educational excellence for the ASEAN nations and beyond, University Tenaga National (Uniten) was established in May, 1997, with a first intake of about 200 students. Initially a place for the training of technical staff for Tenaga National Berhad, it currently runs twinning programmes with universities in New Zealand (NZ) and the United States (US), for courses in Accountancy and Business Management (NZ) and Engineering (US). They have recently received approval from the Ministry of Education to offer their own degrees, and are now working towards the goal of offering a full programme in all faculties in Malaysia.

All the courses offered at Uniten are conducted in English – by both local and foreign lecturers. The number of foreign faculty members (either recruited by Uniten, or sent there by the twinning universities) far out-number the local faculty at the point in time of the start of this study. This situation is changing, with the number of local faculty members increasing.

Most of the students offered places at Uniten are those under scholarship from Tenaga Nasional Berhad. Recently, however, there has been an increase here in the number of students under scholarship from other corporate bodies in Malaysia. And, with its present university status, places are now open to anyone interested in pursuing degrees in the courses Uniten offers.
Students given places to pursue their studies at Uniten undergo a six-month ESL course that is run by the university. Upon entry, they are required to take a placement test (reading, writing, and oral interview) and are subsequently placed in classes according to their proficiency. Class sizes range from about 15 to 22 students per class. Streaming is carried out here. 'Good' classes are those with students with a high level of proficiency in English (that is with good scores in the proficiency test). These students would eventually obtain A's in English Language in the SPM examination. On the other hand, 'weak' classes will have students with lower proficiency in the English language, and these students would usually obtain 'P', or 'F' grades in the SPM English paper.

During the course of the ESL programme, the students have to take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) examination. A score of 550, will ensure students a place in the twinning programme, as this is the 'entry-level' requirement of the twinning universities. Those who do not obtain this score, need to re-sit the exam, and endeavour to make the requisite grade. Those who do not earn the minimum score, even after the 'grace-period', have their places withdrawn. Also, those who do not obtain a Grade I in the SPM examination (the results of which are announced about a month into their ESL course) will also have their places withdrawn.

In summary, students enter their faculties of choice upon attaining a Grade I in the SPM and a minimum score of 550 in the TOEFL examination. It is a requirement of the university that all entrants into its various faculties be in possession of a Grade I at SPM level. The 550-point TOEFL requirement has been set by the participating twinning universities. This mark represents the cut-off point below which it is felt that
students will not have sufficient proficiency in the English language to participate effectively in an all English-medium of instruction.

This study will focus on the first-year students in the Faculty of Engineering.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

At Uniten, English is of great significance because it is the medium of instruction in all subjects. What this study hopes to discover is whether Malaysian students, who come from an educational background of at least 11 years in the medium of Bahasa Malaysia, are able to make the switch to English successfully. This means that they would be able to participate in their content-area courses, understand what is unfolding in the class, and handle the required reading and writing assigned.

A pertinent question that arises here then is whether the ESL course that is currently run at Uniten suffices to equip these students with the skills they need to move from an all-Bahasa Malaysia to all-English environment?

This study takes its cue from the recent developments in reading research that reveal reading to be more than a passive activity. There is renewed interest in the reading-writing relationship, and in readers’ metacognitive awareness of strategies (Carrell, 1988). This study aims to focus on the students’ reading-writing experience in the content-area classroom. Specifically, what interests the researcher are issues relating to the reading-writing needs of first-year Engineering students: what, why and how they read; what, why and how they write; and, what problems they encounter in the
reading-writing process, and whether an ESP programme could help address their needs.

The researcher's own experience in teaching ESL at Uniten has prompted the undertaking of this study. First year engineering students are required to take the subjects of Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and one English language paper. This study is prompted by the need to establish what exactly students need to do in terms of reading and writing in tow of their content-area classes – Physics and Chemistry. It was decided that the study focus on these classes as the researcher felt that there would not be much reading and writing (as it is understood in the ESL classroom) in the Mathematics class.

Thus, the focus of the study is the reading-writing experience of the first-year Engineering students. This is a case of ‘reading for learning’ – they now have to read in English to arm themselves with the necessary knowledge to follow their lectures/course, participate in discussions and successfully complete quizzes, assignments, tests and examinations.

Reading is examined here as an ancillary activity – the take-off point to all other academic endeavours, including writing. How and why they read, and how this affects the quality of their writing, are areas under investigation here. Hence, having thus far examined the broad issues relating to the study, several research questions were formulated – in order to give shape to the study, and enable a more focused exploration of the students' content-area classroom. These are introduced in the following section.
1.4 The Research Questions

In view of the areas which are the central focus of the study, the following research questions have been formulated. In the endeavour to discover the reading and writing environment at Uniten, the study set out to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What do first-year Engineering students read in preparation for their academic tasks? How do they read? And, why?
2. What do they need to write? How do they write? Is the knowledge gleaned from their reading evidenced in their written work?
3. What problems do they face: when reading? when writing?
4. How could an ESP programme address student needs in their content-area classroom?

Given the areas of inquiry highlighted in the research questions, it was felt that a Munby-type needs analysis would prove inadequate. Hence, there was a need for a research methodology that would allow for a less ‘static’ approach, that would enable the researcher to discover what actually happens in the content-area classroom – that is, ‘see’ the communicative event in situ.

1.5 An Ethnographic Approach

Hence, given the nature of the questions being researched, it was felt that a research design based on an ethnographic approach would be ideal. This approach to language
learning is based on the assumption that language processes need to be studied in the
contexts in which they occur. Language is thus viewed holistically; not as a series of
separated skills. The role played by language is investigated, and the goal of the study
is ‘thick description’ which is ‘the intelligible description of people in their cultural
context’ (Geertz, 1973:15).

The researcher here wishes to understand how the people in the study view their
world and how they make sense of their experiences, and produce consequent
behaviour. In essence, the researcher wishes to discover what members of the
community know, both explicitly and tacitly, in order to operate in it.

However, there are many tenets that encompass ethnography (see Chapter 2, p.32).
As such, this researcher would like to state that this is a study that employs the tools
of ethnography to enable the researcher to uncover what members of the discourse
community already accept.

Peter Roe (1993:10) envisions research as the looking for answers to questions that
will take ‘the guesswork out of ESP’. Only when the target language is researched can
there be a comprehensive ESP course, and consequently effective teaching.

Roe reiterates that eliminating the ‘guesswork’ involves observing the target discourse
community to discover just what a learner needs to know in order to function as an
effective member of the community. Hence, this study will begin with the observation
of the students in their target situation – specifically taking note of the role reading
and writing plays here. Data obtained from this source will be triangulated against the
perceptions of the students themselves, their lecturers, along with an examination of
the actual reading and writing materials they use. From these sources, a composite
picture of the true reading and writing experience in the content-area classroom
should manifest itself – and this would inform the direction an ESP programme
should take.

Hence, an ethnographic exploration would fit into Roe’s schema – as it would afford a
glance into the workings of the target community. And, it is hoped, that this piece of
research will in some way go towards making ESP less ‘guesswork’ and more
‘informed plan’.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it affords the language teacher a glimpse into the
content-area classroom – an area that has been beyond her ken until now. It will
enable the discovery of the ‘real’ reading and writing experiences of first-year
Engineering students, this knowledge lending credence to how and what is taught in
the ESP classroom.

At Uniten, the study is significant in that it examines the role the current ESL
programme plays in preparing students for the Engineering Faculty. It will highlight
areas of strength, as well as areas of weakness in the current programme, and suggest
a course of action that may be followed to address these. In the final analysis, it would
inform the Language Centre on its current programmes, perhaps enabling the
formulation of an ESP programme that specifically addresses the needs of Engineering students.

From a broader perspective, the findings of this study could be extrapolated to include all SPM/STPM students who enroll locally in twinning programmes with foreign universities. Also, it could include and offer an insight for those who leave for courses in foreign universities overseas, where the medium of instruction is English – proving of special significance to those pursuing degrees in Engineering. In all these cases, the acculturation experiences encountered would not be dissimilar to those of the Uniten Engineering students.

In so far as this researcher is aware, there is no documentation of a local ethnographic study to date that explores the reading-writing experience of ESL learners in a first-year Engineering classroom. It is hoped that the data unveiled in this study are able to make for more focused planning in the design of ESP programmes for reading and writing in the field of ESP for Engineering students.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

One criticism of qualitative studies has been that they are felt to be not generalizable, and are seen as peculiar to the institution in which they have been conducted, and to the students of the study. However, the researcher is confident that the results of this study could be extrapolated to include other institutions of higher learning whose medium of instruction is all in English. The experience of the students at Uniten would not be dissimilar to that of students of other institutions of higher learning if
they are all from primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. This would make them products of the Malaysian education system and they too would face the need to switch from an all-Bahasa Malaysia medium to an all-English medium of instruction. Again, as this study is qualitative in nature, there has been limited use of statistical devices to quantify the data garnered. Nevertheless, the researcher is confident that the ethnographic approach will enable a holistic picture of the content-area classroom to emerge and that this will lend itself to fruitful analysis.

Finally, this study is limited to the small number of participants who agreed to be part of the study. While extrapolation of the findings here should be attempted with caution, these findings could nevertheless prove enlightening to language teachers and learners who have yet to enter the content-area classroom.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter afforded a view of the setting in which this study will be undertaken, and the issues that will be examined henceforth. The following chapter will review the literature pertinent to this area of study, and will provide the framework within which the study will be carried out.